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SUBJECT: FORMER KIM IL SUNG UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR SAYS
DISCONTENT EXISTS AMONG ALL NORTH KOREANS

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Dr. Cho Myungchul, a think tank researcher who defected to South Korea in 1994 after years of living among the DPRK elite, told poloff on February 8 that social discontent among the DPRK's working class was kept in check through propaganda and periodic acts of decency by the state, rather than the threat of force as commonly believed by outsiders. Social discontent existed among all North Koreans, and the elite was more open to change than was commonly believed. Cho opined that building trust between Pyongyang and Washington was crucial for any progress in the Six Party Talks, and that the combination of North Korea's fear of the United States and the importance it placed in having direct contact with the USG was key to understanding its negotiating strategy. He criticized the ROK for indulging the DPRK on its demands while receiving little in return, stressing the need for North-South engagement to focus on reducing tensions rather than on secondary matters. He supported former President Kim Dae-jung's proposed visit to North Korea, as well as the idea of having a second inter-Korean summit, since both events would allow Kim Jong-il to hear about the outside world from "equals" who could present more accurate information than North Korean officials. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (SBU) On February 8, poloff met with Dr. Cho Myungchul of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIIEP) to discuss his perspectives on North Korean society, the Six Party Talks, and inter-Korean engagement. (BIOGRAPHIC NOTE: Cho is a former professor of economics at Kim Il Sung University in North Korea and the son of former DPRK Construction Minister Cho Chul Jun. He attended the Namsan School, a prestigious primary and secondary institution attended by all of Kim's offspring including Kim Jong-il, and graduated from Kim Il Sung University. He defected to South Korea in 1994 and has since been researching inter-Korean economic cooperation at KIIEP. His entire family, including his wife, who also taught at KIS University, continues to reside in North Korea. END BIOGRAPHIC NOTE.)

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WORKING CLASS DISCONTENT HELD BACK BY "ONE FAMILY" CONCEPT

¶13. (SBU) Cho said reports of harsh living conditions in

North Korea, especially those of more remote provinces, were largely accurate. Social discontent existed at all levels of North Korean society, but was controlled through effective propaganda among the working class and the threat of loss of privileges among the elite. He disputed some observers' assumption that repression or the threat of force by the government prevented the public from voicing their displeasure over the state's chronic and systemic failure to provide necessities like food and fuel. Rather, Cho argued, the government effectively used state propaganda and periodic acts of "generosity" to stem people's anger before public unruliness could spread. The state propaganda machine emphasized the concept of the state and the people being "one family." At the same time, Pyongyang appealed to the public's sympathies by staging events, such as winter quilt distributions, while doing little to hide the fact that the government had problems with foreign debt. Such tactics, which portrayed the government as undergoing hard times along with the people, "pulled at people's heartstrings" enough to make it unthinkable for working-class North Koreans to complain about their own hardship.

¶4. (SBU) Cho dismissed the idea that increased hardship alone could make the DPRK's working class revolt against the regime. The public would continue to sympathize with the plight of the government so long as it believed the state was making a bona fide effort to provide for the people. Cho recalled from his days living in North Korea that local officials would visibly scramble to procure emergency food supplies for their districts in times of shortage. No average North Korean would think that the state intentionally deprived the population of food under such circumstances. Rather, most would have been touched that the government worked so hard to provide for the people. Reports by outside

visitors -- and even North Korean refugees in the ROK -- failed to take this factor into account, Cho argued. The poorest members of the working class have learned to cope with the government's inability to provide for its people, partly through illegal economic activities. If the people of North Korea believed that the state did not care about them, as commonly depicted by Western media, there would have been a number of violent uprisings in the DPRK, Cho said.

• ELITE'S DESIRE FOR STATUS QUO A MYTH

¶5. (SBU) Social discontent among members of the upper and middle classes was a bigger issue for North Korea's stability than among the working class, Cho asserted. Contrary to most outside observers' analysis, the DPRK's privileged class did not desire to maintain the status quo. After years of being beaten down by the regime and its system, however, members of the DPRK elite had all but given up their dreams of pursuing reform and were resigned to pleasing Kim Jong-il and the members of his inner circle. They hesitated to make clear recommendations as Kim Jong-il gave less guidance and increasingly displayed signs of uncertainty on both economic and security policy since the new millennium. This was particularly true of officials involved in economic policy. Cho, who said he had personal knowledge of officials who had "disappeared" after making novel policy recommendations to Kim Jong-il, believed DPRK officials would welcome change in the regime and liberalization of North Korean society if Kim Jong-il allowed it. He dismissed the notion that the North Korean military would object to large-scale economic reforms and social liberalization, asserting that Kim Jong-il alone made economic decisions.

• MIDDLE CLASS SMALL, BUT ALSO THE MOST ANTI-REGIME

¶6. (SBU) According to Cho, no group in North Korea had greater levels of social discontent than the tiny middle class. This group, while subject to far less government scrutiny and monitoring than either the lower or the upper class, had aspirations for improving on the status quo commensurate with their education and mental capacity. They

tended to be jealous of others' accomplishments and rewards and, as such, resented the DPRK's system, which made upward mobility impossible.

FOR DPRK, SIX PARTY TALKS A CONDUIT FOR CONTACT WITH U.S.

¶17. (SBU) On the DPRK nuclear issue, Cho lamented that the United States and North Korea had wholly different objectives for the Six Party Talks. Whereas Washington sought denuclearization as the ultimate goal of the talks, the DPRK used the forum solely as an avenue for direct contact with the USG. With Pyongyang playing the nuclear card to persuade Washington to ease economic sanctions and improve bilateral relations -- a risky gamble from Cho's calculus -- and the United States continuing to assert that denuclearization could not be a side issue to the talks, it was uncertain what could break the deadlock in negotiations.

¶18. (SBU) Cho added, however, that improving ties with the United States was unquestionably the number one priority for North Korea. The fact that the DPRK was willing to endure the awkward dialogue structure of the Six Party Talks indicated just how important contact with the United States was to North Korea. The greatest difficulty to overcome, however, was the fundamental lack of trust between Washington and Pyongyang. Cho noted that the DPRK's fear of the relative size and firepower of the United States alone made it difficult for Pyongyang to trust Washington, even without statements from U.S. officials hinting at regime change. It was easier to understand North Korea's cautious approach in negotiations by remembering that whereas one mistake in the nuclear issue could be costly for the United States, the DPRK believed that one slip-up would bring catastrophic results.

INTER-KOREAN TALKS NOT FOCUSED ON REDUCING TENSIONS

¶19. (SBU) On inter-Korean talks, Cho sharply criticized the ROKG for missing the central point of North-South engagement -- reducing tension on both sides to lay the foundation for eventual reunification. With little to no progress on holding regular military talks, while emphasizing "accomplishments" on economic projects of questionable immediate utility, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the ROKG undermined the long-term viability of its own engagement policy by exacerbating political division in South Korea between those who supported vigorous engagement versus those who preferred a more cautious approach. For a more successful approach, the ROK had to ensure there was measurable progress on military dialogue and cooperation, real improvements in living conditions for average North Koreans, and improved cross-border access. Everything else was secondary. Noting that he had just left a late-evening strategy session on the next round of inter-Korean talks at the Ministry of Unification, Cho told poloff that he had strongly urged that at the March round of inter-Korean ministerial talks, the ROKG should raise human rights, demand the resumption of general officer-level military talks, and generally insist on greater reciprocity in North-South relations. (NOTE: Cho regularly consults for the ROKG on North-South dialogue. END NOTE.)

¶110. (SBU) Cho, stressing that he agreed with the fundamental strategy of engaging North Korea, complained that the ROKG indulged the DPRK's demands excessively and failed to negotiate more reciprocal treatment in cabinet-level talks. He acknowledged that the level of N-S engagement could be viewed as in its infancy and that Seoul could see some advantages to compromising with the DPRK in order to gain long-term cooperation and trust. This ought not continue too long, however, as the DPRK would be spoiled by ROK indulgence. Having visible, measurable markers on reciprocity was crucial, if only for the sake of having broad support for the engagement policy.

KJI NEEDS MORE CONTACT WITH OUTSIDE LEADERS

¶11. (SBU) Cho was positive about plans for former ROK President Kim Dae-jung to visit the DPRK and seek a second inter-Korean summit. Producing a breakthrough or having a set of deliverables from a second summit was less important than for President Roh Moo-hyun to have a chance to engage Kim Jong-il, Cho noted. Both KDJ's visit and a second summit were important ways for Kim Jong-il to discuss the world at large with outside leaders who could explain regional issues to him more candidly than would his lieutenants. The DPRK's culture of "hyper-allegiance" to KJI prevented senior North Korean officials from presenting accurate reports. This phenomenon, coupled with the fact that Chinese and Russian leaders were the only foreigners with genuine access to KJI, exacerbated the North Korean leader's already distorted worldview, Cho said.

VERSHBOW